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Living on the Straight Edge in Ames

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LIVING ON THE STRAIGHT EDGE IN AMES
THEIR NUMBERS ARE FEW. THEIR MESSAGE IS LOUD.

STORY BY: ERIN RANDOLPH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: CYAN JAMES
The city lights of Ames fade into the distance as Greg Rice departs in his black Toyota Paseo. It's Saturday night, 8:34 p.m. as Rice, a 24-year-old engineering graduate student, merges south onto Interstate 35. Destination is the Fallout Shelter — a dingy, one-room, joint-turned-makeshift hole-in-the-wall venue on Des Moines' east side.

A hardcore show started at 7 p.m., over an hour and a half ago, but he's in no hurry. He slouches back in his seat, rests his left hand loosely on the steering wheel while his right hand grips the gear shifter.


Rice gets to about 65 miles per hour, sometimes 72. "See? The Midwest is getting to me," he says, commenting on the lulling pace he's grown accustomed to — a departure from the faster-moving Philadelphia, where he's from.

Rice is "straight edge." He has been since he was 17 or 18. Some of the others at tonight's show are straight edge, too.

Don't drink. Don't do drugs. This is what it means to be straight edge. It's a lifestyle, a life-long dedication to not use drugs or alcohol, and to shy away from promiscuous sex.

The straight edge scene in Philadelphia and in some larger cities is strong. In Des Moines it is pretty weak, Rice says. It's even weaker in Ames. If you want to see a hardcore show — the music of choice for straight-edgers — a trip to Des Moines or Iowa City is necessary, to dingy, one-room, joint-turned-makeshift-hole-in-the-wall venues like the Fallout Shelter.

As he drives, End This Day, a hardcore band incorporating many metal influences, pours from the speakers of his car at about a quarter of their auditory potential. The music is driving and fast-paced, with heavy guitars and short, strained vocals.

Rice has been listening to hardcore music — a louder, faster, harder extension of punk rock — since he was a teenager. He remembers seeing an Earth Crisis band sweatshirt with the straight-edge mantra scrawled across the back at a punk rock show. "It was representative of how I felt about substance abuse," he says. He had become disgusted with what he called the growing anarchist visions of punk rock and the indulgences in drugs and alcohol its followers pursued.

Rice said a lot of straight-edgers have been negatively affected by alcohol and drugs, or have seen the negative effects on their friends and family.

He shied away. "When I was in college and I began to see so many people who would go far beyond a reasonable limit, that's when it became ingrained," he says.
Legend has it the term "straight edge" was first coined by music icon Ian MacKaye and his early '80s punk band Minor Threat. In its 1984 song, *Straight Edge*, Minor Threat rejected the use of drugs and alcohol and advocated a life of self-awareness.

*I'm a person just like you/ But I've got better things to do/ Than sit around/ And fuck my head/ Hang out with the living dead/ Snort white shit/ Up my nose... I've got the straight edge.*

Minor Threat's song gave a name to a movement that had been brewing within the punk culture.

There is no rulebook on straight edge, no set standards. Only suggestions. Each straight-edger must determine the strictness of his or her dedication. Many choose the definition outlined by Minor Threat's anthem — Don't drink. Don't smoke. Don't fuck. — although interpretations can vary greatly from individual to individual.

Rice's girlfriend, Cara Harris, isn't straight edge. But it's never been an issue when she has a cigarette or comes home drunk. "There's that natural guilt," Harris says. "But do I feel horrible?"

No. He's not going to condemn me or anything."

On rare occasions, Rice will have a glass of wine with Harris at dinner.

Because there are varying degrees of straight edge, Rice doesn't think a pro-

claimed straight-edger can be discounted because he or she chooses to drink caffeine or doesn't live an abstinent lifestyle.

"Maybe someone likes to share a romantic evening with their wife or their girlfriend, and cook with alcohol or have a small sip of wine with their wife who might not be straight edge," Rice says. "They're not overdoing it by any means."

Ken Slaba, a 23-year-old senior in liberal studies, disagrees. Alcohol shouldn't be part of a straight edger's lifestyle — even sporadically or in moderation. "As straight edge, you're against that stuff, so even if it's just occasionally, it's not appropriate," he says.

Slaba has claimed straight edge since he was in high school. As part of his dedication, he's pledged not to drink, smoke, do drugs or engage in promiscuous sex. Even caffeine is out of the question.

Tall and slender, Slaba often wears band T-shirts, almost always seen with a stocking cap covering his curly brown hair and a skateboard attached to his hand. His one-strap pack-made-backpack has a black patch with the words *Poison Free* and three Xs.

Although the movement originated on the heels of punk rock, it is now heavily associated with hardcore music. As bands like Minor Threat advocated a drug-free lifestyle, bands like The Germs were doing the opposite — getting drunk on stage. A separation was occurring as punk garnered more mainstream support and hardcore punk remained underground. A lot of the late '80s, early '90s hardcore bands such as Earth Crisis and Strife really began to popularize the straight-edge principles again. "People begin to see things popularized by the bands they love and it just carries on over time," Rice says.

Straight edgers are proud of the life they lead, frequently going out of their way to advertise their lifestyle. "There's a vast assortment of shirts, belts, hats — you name it — that are out there for people to buy to make their commit-

"If you slip up now, and you were only drug free or abstinent for a couple years, you never were straight edge." Greg Rice | *straight-edger*
for the venues to sell alcohol, they needed a way to separate the drinkers from the non-drinkers. Xs were marked on the hands of the sober show-goers. Eventually straight-edge kids began marking their own hands, as a symbol of their dedication.

Another common marking is a lowercase "s" and a lowercase "e," with a larger "X" in between. This, too, is often seen on clothing and accessories.

Slab takes it farther than permanent marker. He has three large chrome-metal Xs tattooed on his leg. It reminds himself and others of his commitment.

It's after nine when Rice pulls up onto the matted grass adjacent to the Fallout Shelter. He's more than two hours late. "But I'd be surprised if more than one band has already played," he says.

If not for the makeshift sign on side of this beat-up building across the street from Mojo Tattoo, you might miss it. And even with the sign, it's hard to spot. Outside, the hardcore kids are milling around. A few smoking cigarettes, the rest taking a break from the crowded space inside.

The huddled mass is surprisingly homogeneous.

Chuck Taylors seem to be the shoe of choice. Studded belts line countless waistbands. Black T-shirts or small vintage cardigans hug skinny frames, and jet black hair is all too common.

Rice is tall, almost a good head taller than the other show-goers on this night. His blonde hair, silver wire-framed glasses, and his attire — a slightly faded navy blue sweatshirt, loose fitting jeans cuffed at the bottom, and black Doc Martens — set him apart from the rest.

Despite his outward appearance, there is nothing about Rice that suggests he is straight edge. Nor are there outward signs that anyone else at the Fallout Shelter is, either. But Rice is confident there are many in attendance.

The show costs $6. The Fallout

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or two stolen, had their instruments played by total strangers when they made the mistake of not watching them constantly.

And they can't do a thing about it. They can't swear back. They can't take aim with their loose change. They have to take the abuse, regardless of how pissed off they get.

"There are so many times I just wish I could swear back," says Chris Verlo, freshman who plays the flugelhorn. "It's so hard, so frustrating to just stand there and take it."

This season, however, it was their fellow ISU students who nearly ended the marching for some members of the band. The marching band regularly occupies an area of the stands directly in front the ISU student section for home games at Jack Trice Stadium. As the final seconds ran off the clock at the end of Iowa State's dismantling of Nebraska, thousands of students were determined to rush the field, the marching band standing before them notwithstanding. Only through a combination of intense yelling by some of the band members and the back rows brandishing their instruments as possible weapons were the excited students convinced to go around the band, not through or over them.

"Everyone was freaking out," Verlo says. "Some people were calling DPS on their cell phones. We were afraid we were going to be trampled."

The band learned its lesson, and when it became apparent that ISU students were going to inexplicably charge the field following the Cyclone's win against Texas Tech, they moved from their normal spots and pulled back to the nearest corner of the stadium to avoid another tense encounter. However, Matt Smith and his band wrongly assumed that the corner — where students could only enter by climbing a railing and then jumping several feet to the ground — would be a hideaway from the frenzied fans. A dozen or so made the leap, almost landing on the band members nearest the railing. The rest thought better of it and sought alternative access.

It's the second quarter, and the band is taking quite a beating in the stands. One fan has already slapped a trumpet across the back of the head.

There's not enough room for the whole band to sit in the stands, so 30 are seated in folding chairs along the sidelines. The flag line is relegated to standing in the corner of the stadium.

The band takes the field to perform its routine, the one that has been practiced time and again all week long. The horns sound strong; the drums are precise and definitive; the flag line's movements seamlessly coordinated. The largely Iowa crowd rewards them with a stirring applause, noticeably more appreciative of this performance than that of their own band. Chests still heaving from the performance, beads of sweat running down their faces, they gulp their water between broad smiles of success.

The Cyclones win again. Five straight years. As the Cyclone players slowly stream off the field, receiving handshakes and back slaps from everyone within reaching distance, and the last of the black and gold shuffle to the exits, victory music flows from these 300-plus proud Iowa State students.

The band plays the fight song one last time during its triumphant march back to the stadium. Cyclone fans emerge from the shadows to cheer their team, their school, their band. Now carrying a large aluminum ladder, I feel proud to be part of this formation, to be associated with this group. Even some of the Iowa fans join the fray.

You were the better band out there! You guys were great; our band sucked!

Shelter is alcohol and smoke free. About 45 hardcore fans are huddled in the small room waiting for the next band — Rice missed only the first band — to carry in its equipment and set up. The walls are adorned with spray paint graffiti renditions of looters and anarchy signs. Seven-inch records are attached to the walls and placed sporadically on the rectangular ceiling tiles — some painted black, not in any particular order.

Painted just above the half-foot light green carpeted stage in sloppy writing is the phrase, "Make your own noise."

Small groups are clustered about the drafty room. As the music starts — Love Lost But Not Forgotten, from Iowa City — the huddles become one large anonymous mass in front of the stage. The music is impossibly fast, vocals screamed, guitar riffs short and quick. If there's an angry, pessimistic political message in these vocals — and there surely is — it's indistinguishable, hidden within the blistering screams.

A semicircle forms in the front of the crowd as 20 kids begin pushing each other, forming a chaotic pit of sweaty bodies. The walls of the Fallout Shelter have scars from these pit battles — one body-sized imprint and another hole about the size of a human head.

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**Mosh pits and heavy music may not be every parent's dream, but certainly the straight-edge message is a welcomed pledge coming from a child. "It's a good feeling knowing some of the problems that some of the young people today have," Ronnie Slaba, Ken's mother, says. "We warned him the dangers of getting involved in drugs and things like that, but ultimately the decision was his."**

Since straight edge is a life-long decision, slipping means losing respect from your fellow straight edge. In some areas, slipping up might even be met with violence in some cases. "It just depends where you are," Rice says. In cities like Salt Lake City, as well as some on the East Coast, violence is associated with the straight edge crowd. Rice says in Salt Lake City, a group of militant, straight edge have turned their camaraderie into gang-like violence — beating up and even killing people they see smoking or drinking. Cases like these have also popped up on the East Coast.

"There are a lot of kids out on the east coast, who, although they don't do drugs or alcohol, won't accept the label..."
because of the violence that is associated with it," Rice says.

In other areas, you’re just discounted as not being straight edge anymore. "If you slip up now, and you were only drug free or abstinent for a couple years, you never were straight edge," Rice explains.

Straight edgers, caught slipping up, might also lose their friends over the indulgence — there’s that much disgust involved in the act.

Both Slaba and Rice agree things are a lot tamer in this area. Neither can say there’s no real hangout for these people who listen to hardcore music and hold the same moral standards. Rice says Minneapolis is the closest big city with a solid base of straight edgers. He’ll often drive there for a show.

Slaba says being straight edge, for him, is a chance to meet likeminded people who listen to hardcore music and hold the same moral standards. There’s no need to force his beliefs on other people, he says.

And he is in it for the long haul. There’s not a doubt in his mind he’ll be able to maintain his current subsistence. "I’m pretty sure I’ve made it through the hardest times," he says. "College is obviously where people are pulled into partying and drinking and stuff, and I’ve never felt the desire to do that."

It’s after midnight when the show ends. Rice sees four bands play at the Fallout Shelter this particular night. Each sound similar, with screaming vocals and loud punishing guitars, but Rice points out the good ones from the bad ones. The crowd starts to disperse, but many stay behind. The music has stopped, so the anonymous mass of bodies that heaved itself in front of the stage has now broken back into small groups.

Rice doesn’t stay. Four bands and one liter of Diet Coke later, he heads for the door. He opens his car door, slides back behind the wheel of his Paseo, and heads back to Ames, where he will go about his daily routine until the next hardcore show.

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are quick, and she will weave your name into the band for fifty pesos. On the way back across the border, I run my fingers over the colors, red, blue and green, and feel the letters with my fingertips. I pretend I am blind and think to myself that even if I were, I would know what my own name feels like.

I wonder if the ocean will look like it does on TV. We leave early in the morning to avoid traffic, Pop says. To get to South Padre Island, you have to drive across a mile-long bridge. In the sunlight, the white bridge looks endless stretched over the blue-green water. Diamonds glint on the water’s surface, hurting my eyes. I am terrified and enthralled crossing the bridge — so much water swirling about it seems impossible that it could end. We drive right up onto the beach; our car is only yards away from the surf. Seagulls circle over us, screeching in hunger. We eat lunch tailgate-style, shaded by the trunk above us. The wind blows sand everywhere, and I can feel the grit in my teeth. It sticks to the mayonnaise on my sandwich and stings my eyes.

Although the water is a shimmering blue-green and sunlight burns down on us, the ocean is cold. The spray licks at my feet, goading me to jump in. I dive in as a wave rolls in, and when I come back up, I find myself almost back on shore. Salt stings my eyes, fills my mouth. Pop takes me out further. Pretty soon I can’t touch anymore and Pop has to carry me. We keep walking until only his neck and head are above the water. With his next step, we are suddenly out of the water, the waves eddying around Pop’s knees.

Pop laughs at my astonishment expression, “It’s a sandbar, they’re sprinkled all over; little rises on the floor of the ocean.” It had seemed for a split second that Pop could fly above the sea. Standing on the sandbar with him, the waves pushed against me, pulling me back towards shore. Careful to stay near Pop, we let the surf take us back, rolling our legs out so our entire bodies were swept along by the waves. It feels like flying.

I was six when my parents divorced, ten when Pop came back into my life and twenty-one today. The summer trips to Texas are no longer possible; I have to work all summer and the responsibilities of leasing an apartment and a serious relationship tie me to Iowa the entire year. Pop comes up twice a year, usually for Christmas and once in the summer. He still looks exactly the same. As an adult, I can see so much more — the shyness peering out from his eyes, the awkwardness he carries like a shield and the deep love he has for me that he holds like an unwieldy package — difficult to grasp but impossible to set down. Even so, he sometimes forgets birthdays and his letters are always separated by great lapses of time. It is hard to forgive someone who forgot you for four years. It is harder still to admit to yourself that you have nothing to prove. I used to be so angry at Pop for forgetting us, but deep down, I just wanted one more chance to be so great that he would never forget me again.

To just let go was the most difficult challenge of my life. I don’t know why Pop left us for so long; the one time I tried to talk to him about it he started crying. Covering his face with his hands, he told me, “You don’t know what it was like. You don’t know how it was for me.” I had never seen a grown man cry before, and his tears made me feel as if I had done something terrible to him. I will not ask him again.

photography by CYAN JAMES